

FROM *Friends* TO *Sisters* TO *Companions*

Valeria led Paula to the gospel through friendship, example, and always being there to help.

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Valeria Pontelli of Río Gallegos, Santa Cruz, Argentina, didn't set out to convert her friend. She simply lived her standards with conviction. Because she is a member of the Church, there were certain things she did and certain things she didn't do, and all her friends knew it. One of those friends was Paula Alvarez, who always watched Valeria closely and was impressed with how faithfully and consistently she lived her beliefs.

Paula had a wonderful family, but they didn't have the gospel—at least not until Valeria came on the scene. Paula remembers, “Valeria was not ashamed of the testimony she had. She knew who she was. She knew she was a daughter of a royal and eternal King, a daughter of God.”

That knowledge and confidence impressed Paula's uncle, Moises. He began investigating the Church and meeting with the missionaries. The day he announced he was getting baptized, Paula was a little shocked. She hadn't expected her uncle to be willing to make such big changes in his life.

The whole family was invited to the

baptism, but Paula was hesitant to attend. She didn't know what to expect. Finally, her family convinced her to accompany them to her uncle's baptism. Paula remembers, “As we witnessed my uncle entering the waters of baptism, the Spirit touched my heart. The impact was deep, even undeniable. In that moment I also wanted to commit myself to God and do whatever He might ask of me.”

“May I speak to you?” Paula said, pulling Valeria aside. “I felt something special at my uncle's baptism,” she explained quietly.

Valeria told her friend she had felt the promptings of the Spirit. “He's telling you that you need to follow your uncle's example.”

“But I can't do it alone,” said Paula.

“Don't worry. I'll help you,” assured her friend. Before long, Paula and her whole family were meeting with the missionaries and accepting the invitation to be baptized. Their lives changed forever.

Paula says, “The standards I always saw my friend live were now mine. My friend's testimony was now mine.” Not long after, Paula began to feel an intense desire to share with others what she had been given. When she had been a member for one year, she filled out



her mission papers, met with her priesthood leaders, and received a call to serve in the Chile Santiago East Mission.

Valeria says, “As I watched my friend prepare to serve her mission, the Spirit touched my heart. I wanted to commit myself to serve God the way she was.”

“May I speak to you?” This time it was Valeria who had pulled Paula aside. “I’ve felt something special as you have been preparing to leave on your mission.”

Paula told her friend the same thing her friend had once told her: “It’s the Spirit telling you what you need to do.”

Valeria’s plans hadn’t included a full-time mission. She wasn’t quite sure how to proceed. “I can’t do it alone,” she told Paula.

“Don’t worry. I’ll help you,” her friend assured.

Later, when Valeria opened her call, she was surprised to be going to the same mission as her friend. Paula began serving in October 2002; Valeria joined her in February 2003.

During their missions they saw each other quite often at conferences and activities. They enjoyed catching up and sharing news from their separate areas. They never dreamed that in November 2003 they would be assigned

as companions. Their friendship bloomed into a relationship that will last forever. They have gone from being friends to sisters in the gospel to missionary companions.

Sister Valeria Pontelli says, “At first I was afraid that working together might damage our friendship, but that fear faded the first day. This chance to work together has only strengthened our relationship, and our friendship has helped us in the work.”

Others agree. One woman, who used to be less active but has come back to church because of the efforts of these two missionaries, says, “You can’t help but love them because you can see the love they feel for each other and for everyone around them. They are my angels.”

It was hard for these two companions to say good-bye in March 2004, when Sister Paula Alvarez’s mission came to an end. She was nervous about returning to Argentina and all that the future might bring. These two sisters talked about her concerns as they walked to their appointments together. “I can’t do it alone,” said Sister Alvarez.

“Don’t worry,” came the familiar words from her companion, Sister Pontelli. “I’ll help you.” ■